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No Cause, Mr. Casey

WHO'S GIVING away the nation's top military secrets? CIA Director William Casey says the news media are. Mr. Casey has asked the Justice Department to consider prosecuting the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) under an obscure 1950 law for a report naming a Naval-intelligence project that the network said was compromised by accused spy Ronald Pelton.

If it were an isolated incident, Mr. Casey's complaint would scarcely warrant notice. Other intelligence analysts have roundly dismissed his assertion that NBC's report hurt national security. In describing the broad outlines of Operation Ivy Bells, they agree, the network merely let its viewers in on a secret to which Soviet intelligence officers long have been privy.

But the unfounded charge leveled at NBC is only the latest in a series of cheap shots calculated to intimidate newspapers and broadcasters. Frustrated by leaks, Mr. Casey and other Reagan Administration officials have begun to vent their fury on those who report what their subordinates disclose.

In fact, there is scant evidence that the press has given away the nation's military secrets or placed U.S. intelli-

gence operatives at risk. There is a long tradition of consultation between the press and the Government on national-security matters. When publishers have defied the Government's attempts to suppress an embarrassing news leak on national-security grounds, as in the celebrated Pentagon Papers case, hindsight and judicial scrutiny have largely borne out the press's skepticism.

Those who seek to stop unauthorized disclosures almost never stop to ponder what impels their subordinates to tell tales out of school. In this Administration, the leakers most often are civil servants who doubt their superiors' willingness to tell the truth. They are, in the words of one well-known Washington scribe, the Government's own "lie detectors," dedicated to helping the public distinguish between the Administration's propaganda and reality.

Polygraphs and prosecutorial posturing thus address only the symptoms of the leak epidemic. The root of the problem is the Administration's lack of credibility among its own people. Until their distrust is dispelled, their apprehensions will continue to find an outlet in the press.